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ABSTRACT

A study examined students' perceptions of nonverbal cues as they affected the listening process during interviews with someone from a culture outside of the United States. Subjects were 129 American students in a senior level cross cultural communication course at a midwestern state university; they each interviewed an international person (primarily students enrolled in the university). Interviewers completed the Nonverbal Communication Questionnaire and were asked to note the use of conversational space and hand gestures of the international person, whether or not it was similar or different from American behavior, and whether it had a positive or negative effect on listening to the international person. Results indicated that: (1) the interviewers reported they perceived similarity for seven of the eight forms of interaction in considering the gender of both parties; (2) female interviewers indicated they perceived a negative effect on listening for the use of conversational space but a positive effect for hand gestures; (3) the positive effect for hand gestures occurred only in female-female interaction; (4) when a female interviewed a male, there was a negative effect on listening for both space and gestures; and (5) males perceived a negative effect on listening for both conversational space and hand gestures. Findings suggest that college students need to become more familiar with the values, beliefs, and resulting behaviors of persons from other cultures to assist in the reduction of uncertainty and anxiety. (Contains 29 references and four tables of data; an appendix contains the Nonverbal Communication Questionnaire.) (RS)

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GENDER, NONVERBAL CUES, AND INTERCULTURAL LISTENING:

CONVERSATIONAL SPACE AND HAND GESTURES

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Paper presented at the meeting of the International Listening Association, Mobile, Alabama, March 12-15, 1997.

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INTRODUCTION

"Basic values and beliefs about what is right and how things ought to be done have constructed our version of reality. They tell us what is normal. Values are the most subtle of our cultural patterns and yet the most influential for communication with someone from another culture" (Thomlison, 1991, 94). Communication behaviors (verbal and nonverbal, speaking and listening) are the means through which intercultural interactions take place. As participants in intercultural communication we must gain more understanding and appreciation of cultural values and beliefs and must strive for more proficiency in the skills of our communication behaviors.

EXPERIENTIAL STUDENT PROJECT

Project Description

The author of this paper is employing an experiential student project in a university intercultural communication course in which listening is a primary focus of the participants in intercultural interviews. The project especially centers upon the student's perception of nonverbal cues as they affect the listening process in the interviews. When interviewing someone from a culture outside the United States, it is stipulated that the person must have been in this country for preferably one year or less. The experience must be structured as two or more interview sessions, not just one. A different location for each of the sessions is encouraged. Activities other than simply sitting across the table in a classroom or lounge are urged, also. Meeting in the University Center, going out to eat at an informal restaurant, or inviting the person over for lunch are examples of varied situations which appear to facilitate the desired experiences intended for this project. Two types of information are sought from the intercultural interviews. One type is the information exchanged by the participants about the culture and the communication process of the respective culture. A second type of information is what is gained by both participants from observing and reflecting upon the actual communication experience in the interviews. Listening and, in particular, the affect of certain listening cues on listening is an aspect emphasized. To assist the student interviewer gain insight into how the communication is going, suggestions are given as to how to focus on the nonverbal cues in the interviews (Ostermeier, 1993, 4).

Previous Reports of Data

Previous presentations and publications have reported on the results of earlier stages of analyses of this project: over-all observations about the experiences of the American student interviewers (Ostermeier, 1992), the nature of the interviewer's perceptions of specified nonverbal cues (Ostermeier, 1993), the perceptions of the interviewers concerning the impact of differences in meanings for specified nonverbal cues on their ability to listen (Ostermeier, 1995), and the relationship of gender to perceptions of facial, eye, and vocal cues and their interpreted meanings by the listener (Ostermeier, 1996).

PURPOSE OF PAPER

The purpose of this paper is to report and discuss descriptive data from the intercultural interviews focusing on the following questions:

1. Do perceptions of similarities or differences in meanings for conversational space and hand gestures and their meanings differ according to the gender of the participants?
2. Do perceptions of whether differences, if any, have a positive or negative affect on listening vary according to the gender of the participants?

BACKGROUND

Gender and Nonverbal Cues - American Culture

The literature reveals considerable evidence of gender-related nonverbal and listening tendencies of American males and females. "Numerous studies have established women's superior abilities as both decoders and expressors of nonverbal messages when compared to men" (Borisoff & Merrill, 1991, 65). "Gender-related listening tendencies have been identified. Due to their stronger nonverbal cues and their focus on the relationship aspect of communication, women are perceived as more empathic than men by both men and women" (Brownell, 1996, 357). "Women, but not men, seem to adapt their nonverbal behaviors to make them compatible with the personality traits and attitudes of their opposite-sex partners. Men tend to remain inflexibly committed to a proactive communicative style, but women modify their nonverbal communicative behaviors. They adapt to meet their male partners' perceived needs, rather than to meet distinctive requirements of a particular kind of communicative situation" (Leathers, 1992, 329).

Gesture and Space Gender Differences in American Cultures

The existence of gestural and space gender differences in American culture is extensively cited in the literature (see Burgoon, Buller, and Woodall, 1996; Malandro, Barker & Barker, 1989; and Richmond, McCroskey, and Payne, 1991, among others).

Gesture and Space Differences - Other Cultures

There is also considerable evidence showing there are differences among cultures in the use of conversational space as well as with hand gestures. A sampling can be noted. "People from different cultures learn the gestures and movements of their culture. People from different parts of the world differ substantially in their gesturing. The use of our hands can mean different things in different cultures" (Richmond, McCroskey, & Payne, 1991, 296). For example, "in a culture in

which arm movement during communication is not common a sweeping gesture might be inappropriate in all situations" (Victor, 1992, 188). "The fact is that a Latin, Arab, or Indian speaker is more articulate kinesically, often accompanying with movements linguistically expressed ideas which an Anglo Saxon hardly illustrates kinesically, and that he uses a wider range of ionic gestures which may result in some typical zero-decoding situation when he interacts in certain foreign cultures" (Poyatos, 1983, 122). North Europeans watching a South European on television disapprove of waving hands and other gestures. So do the Japanese..." (Trompenaars, 1994, 73).

The use of space in conversations across cultures is illustrated in the following instances. "A person whose space has been intruded upon by another may feel threatened and react defensively. In cultures where close physical contact is acceptable and even desirable, Americans may be perceived as cold and distant. On the other hand, less space in American culture may be associated with either greater intimacy or aggressive behavior" (Levine & Adelman, 1993, 109-110). Watson and Graves (1996) report that Americans sat further apart than did Arabs. Noesjirwan's (1987) found that Indonesians selected closer distances in chair placement than did Australians. Sussman and Rosenfeld (1982) noted that, when speaking their native language, Japanese maintained greater distances than did the Americans or Venezuelans. "A typical source of misunderstanding for Americans who, when in Spain, Italy, or Morocco, feel their interlocutor's face about twelve inches from their own" Poyatos, 1983, 15). In addition to preferences in space, "the use of space by different cultures can communicate various meanings" (Richmond, McCroskey, & Payne 1991, 302).

Gesture and Space Gender-Related Differences - Other Cultures

While there may be differences in the use of conversational space and hand gestures from culture to culture, there also can be differences between cultures in how females and males relate to each other through these two nonverbal cues. To illustrate this point, observe the following examples. "In America, a pair of males or a male/female pair stand further apart than a female pair when conversing. Among Italians, males interact closest, followed by females, then male/female pairs" (Klopf, 1991, 218. "Mediterranean men typically mark their language with very frequent proxemic shifts toward and away from each other. It is an easily observable cultural characteristic that strikes the foreign speaker if he comes from a much more static affair" (Poyatos, 1983, 109). In Harrison (1983, 92-93) it is reported that some gestures used by Brazilians are appropriate only to certain sex groups, thus, a woman would typically not use a man gesture without being perceived as odd. Some of these gestures, however, while not used by Brazilian women are used by women in other cultures. Saitz & Cervenka (1972), in comparing the use of gestures in Columbia and the United States, periodically refer to certain gestures which were employed either by males or females but not by both. Among these gestures, there were instances in which there were gestures employed by Colombian females which would not necessarily be used by females in other cultures. Likewise for males. Condon (1985, 60-61) commented that the use of hand gestures is generally more extensive in Mexico than in the United States. Not a few of these used by males have sexual meanings. These may have meanings for U.S. males while a different

meaning for Mexican males. Burgoon, Buller, & Woodall (1996, 221-222) point out that in some Arabic cultures, especially those characterized as more traditional, illustrators compensate for the absence of facial expression when women wear veils covering the face. Such gestures are often quite elaborate. These gestures would not only be unfamiliar to males, but also to females outside the Arabic world, such as Western cultures.

THE SUBJECTS

The 129 American interviewers were students in a senior level cross cultural communication course at a midwestern state university with an enrollment of approximately 9,000. The course has multiple sections and meets a university diversity requirement. Only a few students in each section are speech majors with the typical student in the course having had one fundamentals of speech course prior to taking the cross cultural communication course.

The interviewees were international persons primarily students enrolled in the university. A small number were exchange students attending area high schools. Areas of the world represented were: Africa (14), Asia (56), Europe (28), Latin America (20), and the Middle East (11).

THE NONVERBAL QUESTIONNAIRE

Interviewers completed the Nonverbal Communication Questionnaire (see Appendix A). They were asked to note the use of conversational space and hand gestures of the international person, whether or not it was similar or different from American behavior, and whether it had a positive or negative affect on listening to the international person.

RESULTS REPORTED IN 1996 PRESENTATION

Results pertaining to eye behavior, facial expression, and voice as they related to gender were presented at a conference in 1996. In a female-female interaction, subjects perceived their listening to be positively affected by all three cues. In a female-male interaction, it was a positive affect for two of the three cues. In a male-male interaction, listening was perceived to be negatively affected for two of the three cues. In a male-female interaction, it was positive for all three cues (Ostermeier, 1996).

RESULTS

Gender of Interviewer Only:

Perception of Congruent or Noncongruent Nonverbal Behavior:

Of the 73.5% of the FEMALES who perceived similarity or difference in conversational space, 70.3% perceived SIMILARITY. Of the 71.3% of the FEMALES who perceived similarity or difference in hand

gestures, 54.8% perceived SIMILARITY.

Of the 78.6% of the MALES who perceived similarity or differences in space, 66.7% perceived SIMILARITY. Of the 81% of the MALES who reacted to gestures, 52.9% perceived SIMILARITY. (See Table 1.)

Perception of Affect on Listening:

Of the 68.2% of the FEMALES who perceived that the use of space had an affect on listening, 60.3% perceived a NEGATIVE affect. Of the 63.7% of the FEMALES who reacted to hand gestures, 75.6% perceived a POSITIVE affect on listening.

Of the 72.4% of the MALES who perceived either a positive or negative affect due to space, 53.3% perceived a NEGATIVE affect on listening. Of the 48.5% who reacted to hand gestures, 61.9% perceived a NEGATIVE affect on listening. (See Table 2.)

Gender of Both the Interviewer and Interviewee:

Perception of Congruent or Noncongruent Nonverbal Behavior:

For Females:

In a FEMALE-FEMALE interaction, 83.7% reacted to conversational space with 73.2% of them perceiving SIMILARITY. Of the 65.3% who reacted to hand gestures, 53.1% perceived SIMILARITY.

In a FEMALE-MALE interaction, 65.8% perceived similarity or difference in use of space. Of this group, 68% perceived SIMILARITY. Of the 78.9% who reacted to gestures, 56.7% perceived SIMILARITY. (See Table 3).

For Males:

In a MALE-MALE interaction, 75% perceived similarity or difference in use of space and 73.3% of them perceived SIMILARITY. Of the 95.5% who reacted to gestures, 57.8% perceived DIFFERENCE.

In a MALE-FEMALE interaction, 81.8% indicated similarity or difference in conversational space with 61.1% of them perceiving

SIMILARITY. Of the 86.4% who reacted to gestures, 57.9% perceived **SIMILARITY**. (See Table 3).

Perception of Affect on Listening:

For Females:

In a **FEMALE-FEMALE** interaction, 71.4% reported either a positive or negative affect on listening due to conversational space. Of these

individuals, 62.9% perceived a **NEGATIVE** affect. Of the 65.8% who reacted to hand gestures, 59.4% perceived a **POSITIVE** affect.

In a **FEMALE-MALE** interaction, 64.5% perceived an affect on listening due to space. Of this group, 54.2% perceived a **NEGATIVE** affect. Of the 57.2% who reacted to gestures, 54.5% perceived a **NEGATIVE** affect. (See Table 4).

For Males:

In a **MALE-MALE** interaction, 58.3% perceived either a positive or negative affect on listening due to conversational space. Of these individuals, 72.7% perceived a **NEGATIVE** affect. Of the 50% who reacted to gestures, 70% indicated a **NEGATIVE** affect on listening.

In a **MALE-FEMALE** interaction, 60% reported an affect on listening due to use of space. Of this group, 69.2% perceived a **POSITIVE** affect. Of the 50% who reacted to gestures, neither positive nor negative were favored. (See Table 4).

DISCUSSION

Perception of Similarity or Difference in the Specified Nonverbal Cues:

In considering only the gender of the interviewer, the interviewers reported they perceived similarity for all four forms of interaction (female-space, female-gestures, male-space, male-gestures). It must be noted, however, that for the two situations involving gestures, the figures were in the low 50% range. Thus, for these two conditions, almost as many felt there was a difference as did those who claimed there was a similarity.

In considering the gender of both the interviewer and the interviewee, interviewers reported they perceived similarity for seven of the eight forms of interaction. Once again it must be pointed out that four of the seven reporting similarity were once again in the 50% range (female-female

gestures, female-male gestures, male-male gestures, male-female gestures). Thus, while eleven of the twelve combinations were classified as similar, six of the eleven showed a substantial indication of perceived differences in conversational space and hand gestures.

Perception of Affect on Listening:

When only the gender of the interviewer is considered, female interviewers indicated they perceived a negative affect on listening for the use of conversational space but a positive affect for hand gestures. When the gender of both American interviewers and international interviewees is taken into account, however, it was found that the positive affect for hand gestures occurred only in a female-female interaction. When a female was interviewing a male, there was a negative affect on listening for both space and gestures.

When the gender of only the interviewer was considered, male interviewers indicated a negative affect on listening for both conversational space and hand gestures. When the gender of both the interviewer and interviewees is considered, however, it was found the negative affect only applied to male-male interactions. When a male was interviewing a female, there was a perceived positive affect for space and neither a tendency toward a positive or a negative affect for gestures.

The results reported in this paper which focus on conversational space and hand gestures are similar in many respects to the results in the previously reported data dealing with facial expression, eye behavior, and vocal cues. It appears gender may be an important factor in assessing the affect of nonverbal behaviors on intercultural listening. It is not simply a matter that males and females respond differently in certain instances as interviewers. The gender of both participants as well as the type of nonverbal cue seem to be significant factors to take into account.

As with the findings reported previously, the American university student participants were more likely to perceive negative affects on listening due to meanings for certain nonverbal cues when in a male-male or a female-male interaction. It would seem the American participants may be interpreting nonverbal behaviors of the person from the other culture as violating "American gender norms". Thus, the American students may not be acknowledging different meanings for the nonverbal behaviors of the international persons as reflecting different values and beliefs of the other cultures.

In the previously reported results, the interviewers did not respond in the same manner to all three nonverbal cues. Eye behavior was perceived to have negative affects while facial expression and vocal cues were viewed more positively. In the case of the two nonverbal cues analyzed in this paper, the use of conversational space was more likely to be seen as having a negative affect than was the use of hand gestures.

Finally, it should be noted that, as with the previously reported results, perception of similarity in the use of nonverbal cues doesn't necessarily result in perception of a positive affect on listening.

Nor does perception of difference always result in perception of a positive affect. Perhaps gender of participants, type of nonverbal cues, the particular "other" culture, as well as other factors may interact to influence varied outcomes.

CONCLUSION

Very few of the 129 American student participants in this project reported any meaningful interactions with international persons prior to being involved in this intercultural interview project. Any contacts tended to be of the nature of brief exchanges before or after classes, in dorms, or in the University Center. The emphasis, however, was that they were very brief. Why are such contacts so infrequent and so brief? Gudykunst & Kim (1992, 10) emphasize that "interacting with people from other cultures and/or ethnic groups is a novel situation for most people. Novel situations are characterized by high levels of uncertainty and anxiety." It would seem important that college students need to become more familiar about the values, beliefs, and resulting behaviors of persons from other cultures to assist in the reduction of uncertainty and anxiety. In the process, becoming aware of cultural differences in the perception of affects on intercultural listening of different nonverbal cues would also appear to be highly warranted. For it is in how one listens to someone from another culture that can determine whether one even wishes to interact with that person. The student experiences reported in this project would seem to point to this as something to incorporate more fully in the learning process of students. These observations, of course, must be taken in the context of the limitations of this particular project. The data is based on self-reported perceptions and, thus, must be viewed conditioned by the limitations of self-reported observations.

One of our goals as educators should be to strive to help our students become competent in intercultural interactions. Particularly with the relationship of nonverbal behaviors and listening, we should stress that "effective cross-cultural listeners recognize differences in nonverbal systems and do not make assumptions about what various behaviors mean. The effective cross-cultural listener maintains an attitude of acceptance and open-mindedness, listening not only to accomplish a specific task but also to learn and to appreciate other ways of seeing the world" (Brownell, 1996, 363).

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APPENDIX A

NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION QUESTIONNAIRE

Interviewing Someone From Another Culture

You should look over the following questionnaire items prior to having your interview sessions.

Country/Culture _____ Sex _____

Length of Time in the United States _____

USE OF CONVERSATIONAL SPACE

1. Very Similar to Americans _____ Very Different _____

2. If the use of space was different, check appropriate response(s):

a. Distance between us _____ closer _____ further away

Changes in spacing: _____ stayed same _____ moved around

b. Other (please specify):

c. What meanings were communicated by these differences?

d. In what ways do you feel these differences affected your listening to the international person?

USE OF HAND GESTURES

1. Very Similar to Americans _____ Very Different _____

2. If hand gestures were different, check appropriate response(s):

a. Frequency: _____ more _____ less than Americans

Types/Kinds: _____ more _____ fewer

Size: _____ larger _____ smaller

b. Other (please specify):

c. What meanings were communicated by these differences?

- d. In what ways do you feel these differences affected your listening to the international person?

TABLE 1

Perception of Congruent/Noncongruent Nonverbal Behaviors

	Space		Gestures	
	Similarity	Difference	Similarity	Difference
Females	70.3%		54.8%	
Males	66.7%		52.9%	

TABLE 2

Perception of Affect on Listening

	Space		Gestures	
	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative
Females		60.3%	75.6%	
Males		53.3%		61.9

TABLE 3

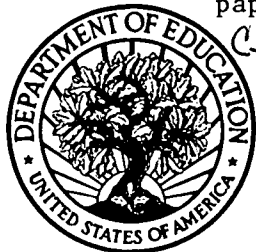
Perception of Congruent/Noncongruent Nonverbal Behaviors

	Space		Gestures	
	Similarity	Difference	Similarity	Difference
Female-Female	73.2%		53.1%	
Female-Male	68.0		56.7	
Male-Male	73.3			57.8
Male-Female	61.1		57.9	

TABLE 4

Perception of Affect on Listening

	Space		Gestures	
	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative
Female-Female		62.9%	59.4%	
Female-Male		54.2		54.5
Male-Male		72.7		70.0
Male-Female	69.2		50.0	50.0



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